



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



## Partnering for Syria (#partners4syria)

Observations and recommendations on how to build more effective partnerships for humanitarian assistance in Syria

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The Partnership Brokers Association (PBA)  
Team:



**Joanna Pyres and Helga van Kampen** – who designed and facilitated the workshop and the strategic meeting in Gaziantep and compiled this report – are Approved Associates working with and on behalf of the PBA. Between them, they have many years' experience of brokering, scoping, building, maintaining and reviewing multi-stakeholder partnerships in Africa, Europe, South Asia and beyond. In the way they work, they aim to embody the PBA approach to partnering effectively, namely a focus on: deepening engagement between key players; building partnering capacity; openly sharing partnership tools / techniques / lessons and working together in ways that model collaboration in action.

**Asya Marhubi** (Research Officer, PBA) provided long-distance research support.

**Ros Tennyson** (Development Director, PBA) gave a final editorial perspective on the report's findings and conclusions.

### Disclaimer

We have done our best to represent the picture as fairly as possible given limited time and limited access to the many different stakeholders involved in this complex context. All quotes included in the text are unattributed as those interviewed were told their comments would be regarded as confidential. They have been selected to present a range of views but, ultimately, they are opinions of just a few players and should not be taken as representing all views. Responsibility of the choices of what to include lies with the team and should not be taken as representative of the views of either PBA or ICVA.

## GLOSSARY

**ICVA:** International Council of Voluntary Agencies, a global network of non-governmental organizations.

**INGOs:** International non-governmental organizations, bringing global experience in emergency humanitarian response.

**SNGOs:** Syrian non-governmental organizations. In the context of this report, SNGO refers to the larger organizations with representation (and registration) outside of Syria.

**Syrian NGO networks:** Networks of Syrian and local NGOs emerging from the need to support and coordinate amongst themselves.

**NGO Forum for NGOs Operating in Northern Syria** (herein referred to as the “NGO Forum”): established in 2012 as a network of SNGOs and INGOs.

**OCHA:** the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a coordinating body for emergency humanitarian response.

**OFDA:** Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, a humanitarian response donor, is responsible for leading and coordinating the U.S. Government’s response to disasters overseas.

**PBA:** Partnership Brokers Association, the international professional body for those managing and developing partnerships and other forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration.

**PoP:** the Principles of Partnership (Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility, Complementarity)

**PI:** the Partnership Initiative, formally established in 2014 – Network of all NGOs in Southern Turkey to coordinate capacity-building programs and to strengthen partnerships

**Local (Syrian) NGOs:** Syrian community-based organizations emerging in response to humanitarian need. Typically they are small, informal, flexible and passionate, and for the purposes of this report include those organization without representation or presence outside of Syria.

**UN Agencies:** United Nations bodies (UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR, OCHA, WHO, etc.) with mandates to bring international response and experience in specific sectors.

## The Starting Point

*“Whilst partnering may take more time and be more expensive, it may also be more effective even in the short term, and in the longer term it may mitigate risk in the region. There is a desire to get better at partnering by going into the nuances and complexities and investing in the long-term resilience agenda, which raises different questions around identity and roles.”<sup>1</sup>*

The humanitarian sector faces huge challenges in finding an appropriate response to the Syrian crisis. Many work hard to understand the crisis better. Many seek to understand their roles and the roles of other key actors in delivering an effective response. Alongside a number of other centers, Gaziantep, 60 km from the Turkey-Syria border, has become a hub for a wide range of Syrian and international actors, including SNGOs, INGOs and UN agencies, who are responding to emerging humanitarian needs both in northern Syria and in the camps on the border.

Increasing challenges to crossing the Turkey/Syria border has left international agencies forced to respond at a distance, with some responding with their own Syrian staff inside Syria, and many working with Syrian organizations who have networks, contacts, offices and staff inside Syria. This working relationship is often termed, probably somewhat inaccurately, as ‘partnership’<sup>2</sup>. As the number of new international actors and emerging Syrian civil society actors rapidly increases<sup>3</sup>, together with the unpredictability of the conflict itself, working collaboratively in the region is proving extremely challenging for individuals and organizations.

In May 2013, NGOs met for the first time to explore the idea of a partnership platform – what subsequently became the Partnership Initiative (PI). This was envisaged as a platform for the discussion of partnership issues, specifically those arising from the significant problem of remote relationship management. The terms of reference of the PI were formalized in September 2014 and a one-year pilot was funded by OFDA and hosted by Relief International. The end of the PI one-year funding cycle now offers an opportunity to understand what has been learned about partnering in this particularly complicated scenario (including from the PI pilot itself). A process of reflection and review can inform decisions about more effective collaboration going forward.

Earlier research<sup>4</sup> has indicated that partnering as a response to the Syrian crisis is a key intervention mechanism but building robust and efficient partnerships has not proved easy. It is clear that there is a critical partnering capacity issue that needs to be addressed.

In November 2015, the PBA was invited by ICVA to undertake a number of activities to build a picture of the current status of partnering in the region and to identify what might be needed to strengthen partnering capacity and deepen engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewee

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘partnership’ has specific connotations of shared risk and benefit, aspiring towards a level of equity between those involved as ‘partners’ and a commitment to co-creating the partnering approach and project activities.

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of types of mechanisms described as partnerships operating in the region including those among different (I)NGOs or among Syrian NGOs (SNGOs), as well as those between an INGO, and/or SNGO and/or local Syrian NGOs.

<sup>4</sup> K. Howe *et al.*, *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings—The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan* Tufts University, 2015. Available [here](#).

## Rationale for this work

ICVA, as a global network of humanitarian NGOs, advocates for policies that ensure better partnership approaches for NGOs by engaging in policy development to strengthen partnership approaches in humanitarian work. Working through its regional hubs, ICVA seeks to support strong NGO partnerships based on the Principles of Partnership<sup>5</sup> by providing platforms for improving NGO partnerships, with particular attention to national NGO capacity support amongst NGOs, UN agencies and other stakeholders.

In the Syrian context, while many INGOs have been carrying out cross-border operations in northern Syria since the beginning of the crisis, today a large volume of humanitarian operations are also carried out in partnership with Syrian organizations, and it is foreseeable that Syrian NGOs will take on an increasingly greater share of the response. It is, therefore, important to ensure that NGO partnerships be as effective and transformational as possible

Reflecting again on these partnership principles and the relationship between INGOs and NNGOs would allow the humanitarian community to reassess the impact of existing partnerships and ways in which they may be improved.

In light of the above, the main objectives of this work were to:

- Bring global-level expertise in partnerships to bear in the northern Syria context by engaging with those directly engaged in partnerships;
- Share experiences on successful partnerships, provide examples of the principles in practice and promote peer-to-peer learning;
- Harness examples of best practice from the northern Syria context for global learning;
- Facilitate a strategic discussion on the evolution of the Partnership Initiative with key stakeholders, helping to identify the concrete needs that national and international NGOs have that may be addressed by the PI, whether internally or externally.

## The PBA approach

The PBA team on the ground<sup>6</sup> engaged with key stakeholders in Gaziantep through interviews, a workshop (with the participation of 18 NGO representatives)<sup>7</sup> and a strategic meeting with a consultative group (7 NGOs, 1 donor and 1 UN agency). In both these events, the approach centred on trying to draw out the real challenges faced by those involved and to introduce some key concepts and principles of good partnering practice that have evolved in equally challenging contexts in other parts of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The team recognise that this is far from easy, but where there is a level of urgency combined with a deep concern of those involved (within and beyond Syria) to make things better, a lot

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<sup>5</sup> see <https://icvanetwork.org/icvapop-campaign>

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Pyres & Helga van Kampen

<sup>7</sup> The intention of the workshop was two-fold: to share global-level partnering experience and expertise with local actors and to harness examples of good practice from key stakeholders in the northern Syria context, to be shared for global learning.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that only 10 days were allocated to this mini-project – including preparation, pre-workshop interviews, background reading, workshop design / delivery, strategic meeting design / delivery and the write up of this report. This meant that the PBA team were in Gaziantep for only four days. Border restrictions and time constraints also meant pre-workshop conversations were limited. The majority of people interviewed prior to the workshop were Syrians, with fewer from the INGO and UN communities

can be achieved if partnerships are inclusive and there is a systematic and rigorous approach to the partnering process – grown from within rather than imposed from outside.

What follows is a **brief summary report** of the partnership issues flagged by those involved in the humanitarian coordination system and observed by the PBA team together with a number of **recommendations** arising from the workshop and strategic meeting about what is needed to make partnering more effective.

The intention in this report is to be as succinct as possible to make the material accessible and useful. In the **appendices**<sup>9</sup>, however, far more detailed findings and insights can be found. These appendices are:

1. History and Context;
2. Findings from interviews and meetings;
3. Practical examples of lived experience;
4. Brief overview of the Partnership Initiative;
5. Emerging questions;
6. Recommendations on next steps;
7. Further information about PBA<sup>10</sup>;
8. Terms of Reference for this project.

The report is intended to aid and build shared learning by helping to make sense of what has been experienced and the lessons that can be drawn from that experience so far, in order to create a better understanding of diverse perspectives and to build empathy between the range of players involved.

It is hoped that, despite the limitations in terms of the scope of this mini-project, the experience and this report will provide new insights, practical ideas and a prompt for further action amongst all the humanitarian actors involved. Through this, there may be a real possibility of rapid improvement in the effectiveness and impacts of collective efforts (including the development of genuine partnerships) and measurable collaborative advantage in the north Syrian cross-border humanitarian operations.

## Overview of Findings

### Defining terms

Humanitarian inter-organisational relationships are often labelled as ‘partnerships’ and those involved are described as ‘partners’. These terms bring with them certain expectations about how these relationships will unfold and what responsibilities they bring. Whilst there is some evidence of strong collaboration between some actors, more frequently response mechanisms (which are, of course, designed as a response to an urgent humanitarian need) are little more than funding arrangements in a linear chain from donor to beneficiary. This one-way relationship, based on the flow of money for project delivery, creates an inherent power imbalance that challenges the notion of ‘partnership’ as a mechanism based on equity

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<sup>9</sup> A separate document

<sup>10</sup> This includes more information about the PBA approach

and / or mutuality. Indeed, it has created a level of cynicism about ‘partnership’ in some, one of whom expressed the experience of partnering as “*neither true nor fair*”.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst this is quite a common experience of the donor-beneficiary relationship worldwide, the situation is exacerbated by the remote nature of the work of many organizations in northern Syria (i.e. not having their own employees on the ground delivering directly). For many international agencies working with Syrian entities is a necessity not an option. The question is how to do this in highly challenging circumstances in which more equitable partnership relationships are even harder to build.

## A growing sense of expectation and entitlement

The high level of education and the strong sense of responsibility within the growing number of Syrian NGOs has led to an expectation of being treated as equals and being respected for their knowledge of the current situation, cultural drivers and urgent needs inside Syria. There is also a strongly-expressed expectation that Syrian civil society will be helped and supported to grow by international players as part of the Syrian road to establishing a healthy democracy.

The growth of Local Administrative Councils (LACs) in Syria is further proof of the growing vibrancy of the Syrian civil society movement with the LACs becoming a key player and stakeholder.

## Limitations of the current humanitarian system (and its impact Syria)

The present humanitarian system and its ways of operating may not sufficiently encourage and enable effective partnerships for the many different stakeholders directly and indirectly involved. In this context, besides the usual players in the humanitarian sector (INGOs/national NGOs/UN), there is a strong commitment to working collaboratively to address the crisis from the Syrian diaspora NGOs, Syrian NGO networks and local Syrian NGOs, many of which have been established as a response to the crisis. This in itself requires a different way of working from the wider humanitarian sector.

From the interviews and the meetings, it seems that there is awareness that partnering (if undertaken rigorously) could really improve the quality of relationships as well as the quality of humanitarian outcomes and impacts but there are many challenges (actual or perceived) to effective partnering on a day-to-day basis. These include the following.

## General humanitarian / donor approaches

- Reporting and assessment<sup>12</sup> requirements are considered very complicated and do not fit the local situation appropriately. Some SNGOs have the impression that “*reporting is a higher priority for INGOs/donors than impact on the ground*”. Local NGOs need less burdensome administrative procedures in order to be able to spend more time on program implementation. It is likely that this influences attitudes towards partnering and risks it being seen as yet another ‘demand’ from donors and INGOs.
- Programs and projects are often planned and designed outside Syria rather than alongside Syrian counterparts and as a result are not based (enough) on the needs and

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<sup>11</sup> Interviewee

<sup>12</sup> See “[Partner Capacity Assessments of Humanitarian NGOs - Fit for purpose?](#)”, ICVA, June 2015. See also ICVA’s upcoming “Reduced Burden for Better Aid” project (#LessPaperMoreAid).

understanding of the context according to SNGOs. SNGOs express a strong sense that donors and INGOs “*need to listen more attentively*”.<sup>13</sup> Instead, there is a sense that programming is being led by donor priorities and/or external perceptions of what is needed.

- Some INGOs indicate that their vast experience in this field is not acknowledged appropriately by “*the new kids on the block*”,<sup>14</sup> who seem to prefer to be in direct contact with donors and bypass the INGOs.
- Some Syrian NGOs (the small- and medium-size ones especially) comment on the fact that they feel they do not receive the capacity-building they actually need. They indicate that skill-building in several areas is very helpful but the present training offers do not meet their needs. At present they tend to attend standard desk-based training that many INGOs offer, which they experience as centered on compliance and on individual donor reporting requirements. They would prefer tailored trainings, on-the-job learning and mentoring.

### Building civil society in Syria

- SNGOs are very clear that they carry a responsibility for the wellbeing of Syrians in the future and the help they need is to enable them to be in a position to do so effectively. Voices in the highly articulate new Syrian civil society are asking for genuine partnerships that support the growth of a strong and vibrant civil society that Syrians can now, finally, organize for themselves.
- Syrian actors are driven by their fear that Syria may actually be “lost and cease to exist”<sup>15</sup>. The nearby example of Iraq seems like a dire warning of what may happen. Despite 15 years of international humanitarian interventions in Iraq, including the involvement of many Iraqi organization, there remain few viable civil society organizations to help respond to the humanitarian needs created by the current violence<sup>16</sup>.
- Because of the high level of education and aptitude of Syrians now in the NGO sector, the existing appetite for building civil society, the strength of funding and support from the diaspora together with the emergence of LACs as locally-driven platforms for providing public services, a viable alternative is seen as entirely feasible.
- It is anticipated by some that in future the focus may be on relationships with LACs to strengthen systems inside Syria<sup>17</sup>, even if, for now, this needs to be undertaken remotely, for example through such platforms as the Syria Relief Network. Others see it differently.
- There is a real opportunity for international actors to leave a real and positive legacy and make a difference to the region by having a long-term vision of support. Partnering seems, to those involved, to be an obvious way to do this – at least in theory. In practice, however, there is an urgent need for specific partnering / partnership brokering skills, time given to deepening engagement and understanding between players as well as time given to building a shared or co-created collaboration plan.

### Partnership as a delivery mechanism

Expectations of partnership are high and there is quite a gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

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<sup>13</sup> Interviewee

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee

<sup>15</sup> Possible outcomes identified during the workshop

<sup>16</sup> First-hand experience of an interview respondent

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee



## Common partnering challenges (and how these apply in the Syrian context)

- The partnership imperative – when driven by donors, INGOs and national NGOs – creates both additional pressure and high expectations. Partnering as practised in the humanitarian sector repeatedly falls short. In spite of the ‘partnership’ rhetoric, the reality is that the focus is still on funding and reporting (and sub-contracting) rather than on pooling resources and capacities to co-create the best solutions.
- Partnering with local NGOs represents an issue for INGOs since they have concerns about their understanding of international humanitarian norms, practices and principles, level of capacity to deliver services in a timely and effective manner and the level of professionalism of the Syrian NGOs. Often due to limited information available to make informed decisions, INGOs are in general cautious of taking such risks towards partnering, especially with local Syrian NGOs. They see it as a mismatch and therefore not a good basis for partnering. It is the case that because many Syrian organizations are new, they lack a track record that can give INGOs confidence in their capacity. INGOs use assessment procedures to ensure they select and work with “*the right partners*”<sup>18</sup> and this mitigates against change.
- Exacerbating this is the fact that INGOs need to report back to their donors in (often strictly-controlled) reporting formats to account for the programs they have carried out and there is a lot of resistance from the Syrian partners against the established bureaucratic reporting / accounting system.
- Virtually none of the actors interviewed or involved in the workshop feel that they have appropriate expertise, knowledge and skills to create clarity or manage the partnering process effectively. Across the board, those involved in the Syrian crisis find it hard to understand how to build collaboration on a principle of the comparative advantage that comes from diversity. In fact, they often see diverse interests as obstacles.
- On an operational level, power imbalances and the desire for a level of control (over programs and ways of working) are seen to undermine partnerships.
- There is a sense that planning is often rushed and short-term. The humanitarian community has what is frequently described as “*a hasty working culture*”<sup>19</sup> and suffers from frequent staff turnover. Although this can be understood given the emergency nature of the work, this haste has become endemic and seems to hold back partnership potential and wise, collaborative approaches to decision-making at all levels.
- Despite good intent, the broader humanitarian sector itself has a highly competitive culture that tends to mitigate against more genuine partnering arrangements – leaving them as little more than ‘lip service’.

## Partnering principles and good practice (and their importance in the Syrian context)

- Global experience of partnering suggests that the principles of ‘equity’, ‘transparency’ and ‘mutual benefit’<sup>20</sup> (easily aligned with the more recently established Principles of Partnership<sup>21</sup>) are key. Application of these principles is not very consistent, however, and NGOs operating in the region, including for Syrian NGO staff who lack practical guidance on how to put these principles into practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Interviewee

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee

<sup>20</sup> From Tennyson, R, *The Partnering Toolbook*, available for free download (including in Arabic) from [www.thepartneringinitiative.org](http://www.thepartneringinitiative.org)

<sup>21</sup> See <https://icvanetwork.org/principles-partnership-statement-commitment>

- There are, clearly, impediments to equity in this scenario. Many of those interviewed commented on the power of donors (or those handling the money on behalf of donors) which they felt immediately led to a lack of equity and a culture of dependence and “*having to please*”<sup>22</sup> rather than doing what was right. It should be noted, however, that this does not apply to all donors or INGOs.
- There is a need for clearer definition of what partnerships are and when it is more appropriate to stick with a more transactional relationship.
- As far as human resources go, employees of INGOs and NGOs are mainly recruited on the basis of their technical expertise rather than on their partnering competencies.
- Skills, knowledge and trained partnership practitioners are emerging elsewhere and their expertise and experience could easily be shared in this context. In other words, the problem of a lack of partnering expertise is quite easily fixed, with the right investment.

### Mapping contributions of different stakeholders

It is important in any partnership that all those involved make some form of contribution. Indeed, some partnerships are grown from a process of contribution-mapping prior to identifying detailed programs of work. As well as building more equity between different players and drawing on the many less visible contributions that different players can make, the mapping process itself creates a greater sense of co-creation and co-ownership. An example of what such a ‘map’ of possible contributions and capabilities might look like is shown below. It is to be noted that what appears below is purely for demonstration, and should properly be the co-created result of consultations with all stakeholders concerned.

	Capacity-strengthening pillars, including specific skills (left-to-right is also approx. time scale: short, medium and long term)							
Lead:	Operations	Programs	Humanitarian Principles, Code of Conduct	Humanitarian Program Cycle	Partnering expertise	Advocacy	Knowledge and engagement in humanitarian architecture	Civil society strengthening
UNDP								X
NGO Forum						X		
RedR, Baytna Syria, etc.	X							
OCHA HPF				X				
INGOs partnering with SNGOs	X	X						
ICVA			X				X	
PBA					X			
BBR							X	
Sphere		X						

### The role / potential of the Partnership Initiative (PI)<sup>23</sup>

- The PI was established in May 2014 in Gaziantep to lead on issues of partnerships and capacity development for all stakeholders involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance in the northern Syria context.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee

<sup>23</sup> PI’s history, achievements and challenges are covered more fully in Appendix 5

- This is ‘one of a kind’ in the humanitarian sector where NGOs felt the need to gather and learn about partnerships in emergency situations.
- The experience of the PI provides invaluable learning for future potential partnership initiatives in the region (and globally). It is worth reviewing and sharing the experiences more widely.
- At the end of the pilot year, there is an opportunity to re-frame / re-focus the PI’s role. There seems little question from the perspective of those involved that assistance, investment and support is needed to build stronger, more authentic and more sustainable partnerships. The question is, could PI (or a second iteration of it) be a vehicle for all or part of this?

## Visions of the future from participants at the workshop

These are captured from those articulated by the participants during the workshop (mostly Syrians) who were invited to share their vision of future partnerships between SNGOs and with international actors. It is suggested that the list below could serve as building blocks in designing a joint future vision.

<b>Integrity in partnering processes</b> , transparent relationships, all SNGOs have equal access to information, resources, choosing partners according to clear standards and process
<b>Clarity on vocabulary:</b> Only transformational/strategic relationships should be called ‘partnerships’. Capacity-strengthening initiatives are not only for SNGOs. The culture of partnerships is spread throughout organizations from senior management to field/project level.
<b>SNGOs working in strong partnerships under one coordination body</b> and then taking independent decisions to find the fit with the best organization. Building an equitable relationship with all INGOs in understanding and ability to communicate at high level.
Every NGO working in the same cluster or related clusters in a <b>fully integrated partnership approach</b> with others and prepared to submit reports / evidence of their work to a well-structured local governmental body (e.g. LACs).
<b>Establish general standards or guidelines</b> to address the relationships and operational principles between all partners INGOs/NGOs. <i>“We need to modify all specifications in guidelines to avoid confusion between the partners.”</i>
<b>Participation in planning/programming from both sides</b> of partnership including donors, INGOs, SNGOs. Changing modalities of capacity-building among partners, more investment in partnership, giving spaces for your partners.
<b>Equal engagement and collaboration</b> between various actors based on best serving Syrian people in need rather than funding- oriented, where each contributes based on their scope of work and the capacity they have.
<b>Position NGOs at the center of the recovery process</b> when the conflict ends. Acknowledge the work and role SNGOs have played in the response and build on it.
<b>Better information streams between NGOs</b> as well as more equality in funding and how funding is distributed among NGOs, also focused on the country-building and democratic development rather than just emergency response. Communicating about partnerships in practice rather than in theory... being built from the realities faced.

**Civil society able to undertake a number of roles** 1) coordinate and partner to protect people's rights and interests 2) limit the power of politicians 3) advocate for and participate in policy making

To achieve the above, workshop participants identified the following next steps:

- Brainstorm between all stakeholders to further clarify ideas and thoughts;
- Build capacity, human resources with more opportunities for frank / open discussion;
- Societal strategy for all SNGOs;
- Dialogue and engagement;
- Begin collaborative implementation between NGOs;
- Assign someone in each INGO/NGO to be the focal point with PI;
- Build capacity through investment in process / capacity and develop new modalities;
- Provide more technical support in advocacy and policy-making;
- Prepare and support local governmental bodies;
- Build commitment and encourage people to carry responsibility for partnering, monitoring capacity-building and coordination between different initiatives;
- Create a strategy that has structure.

## Recommendations <sup>24</sup>

What is needed now?	Suggested actions / activities
<p>More knowledge about partnership as a paradigm and partnering as a process to be able to challenge / change / improve what currently passes for 'partnership'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Agree and apply core partnering principles – so those involved understand why they are important and what it takes to abide by them</li> <li>○ Introduce clear frameworks for partnering (e.g. the partnering cycle and what kinds of interventions / support are needed at each stage)</li> <li>○ Share examples of partnership governance and decision-making mechanisms that have been tried and tested elsewhere</li> <li>○ Work with donors to identify what is needed from them to support more genuine partnership approaches that maximize their potential (including investment in the partnering process)</li> </ul>
<p>The development of a deeper collaboration culture to bridge the various geographic, cultural, organizational and other (sometimes invisible) boundaries that inhibit collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Well structured, facilitated and 'hosted' stakeholder meetings and other opportunities to challenge and change ways of thinking and acting that inhibit collaboration</li> <li>○ New ways of meeting that 'hold the space' for challenges to be addressed and new ideas / solutions to emerge</li> <li>○ Provide opportunities for feedback and review / 'health checks' to keep partnerships dynamic and responsive to changing needs and new challenges</li> </ul>
<p>Build partnering capabilities in key players at all levels and in the many different stakeholder groups to embed partnering skills, approaches and standards as well as influencing systems and strategies to be more supportive to partnering as a delivery mechanism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Define clearly the necessary skill-sets for effective partnership process management</li> <li>○ Review whether / where these may be available already and bring in new players and / or provide training as necessary</li> <li>○ Provide opportunities for key players to become more familiar with each other's work / ways of working to build more understanding of the diversity (and its value)</li> <li>○ Create one-to-one support for those in key partnering roles (critical friendships / buddying, coaching, mentoring)</li> <li>○ Explore and build capacity for shared leadership and for the development of a cadre of accomplished partnership process managers ('brokers')</li> <li>○ Encourage entities to review / revise all those policies and procedures that are 'business as usual' and not fit for partnering purposes</li> </ul>

<sup>24</sup> From the PBA team, developed from the views expressed and ideas developed at the workshop and the strategy meeting

<p>Create a central, independent, partnership resource unit / hub / platform to offer tools, training, advice, support (e.g. mentoring and coaching) all tailored to the specific context and available to all stakeholder groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Consider whether the Partnership Initiative is (or could become) this kind of very practical and professional specialist resource.</li> <li>○ If so, what would it take?</li> <li>○ If not, what other mechanism is already available to act as a host for this unit or could something be co-created by stakeholders?</li> </ul>
<p>More open exploration about the specific issues / needs in Syria that partnerships could address and what specific partnering approaches / models / practices would be best suited to meeting those needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Explore specific needs and review regularly</li> <li>○ Clarify existing, or create more locally-appropriate, terminology that everyone understands</li> <li>○ Adapt partnering tools developed elsewhere (or co-create them from scratch) so they are locally owned and not imposed</li> <li>○ Focus on ‘partnering for resilience’ not just for project implementation</li> <li>○ Experiment with new and more imaginative approaches to long-distance collaboration</li> </ul>
<p>Build a new approach to partnering by ‘mapping’ what each partner can contribute and valuing non-cash contributions more systematically</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ See page 10 for an example</li> </ul>
<p>Deeper understanding of what it actually takes to partner effectively and invest in the partnering process to: build more long-term, impactful collaboration; reduce waste / duplication and to minimize transaction costs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Donors and INGOs need to explore their own attitudes and expectations of partnership as a humanitarian delivery mechanism – is it a ‘quick fix’ approach to delivering immediate assistance or is it / should it be more?</li> <li>○ If it is more, then a piece of work should be undertaken to assess exactly what level of investment is needed in building robust partnership approaches and competencies, since partnerships will not become more effective without such investment (though, relatively speaking, such costs may be quite modest)</li> </ul>
<p>Work to produce evidence and examples of the added value of partnering and how it may help to strengthen Syrian NGOs and build a robust civil society in Syria in the longer-term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Create some locally-driven ‘learning experiments’ in collaborating differently (requires a willingness to take some level of risk and to be open to unexpected outcomes)</li> <li>○ Undertake ‘mapping’ and vision-building exercises that will enable stakeholders to envisage how best to partner for long-term as well as immediate goals</li> <li>○ Share examples of good practice and achievement</li> <li>○ Create ‘learning case studies’ (in Arabic) that capture the stories behind the partnership that will share experience between peers and build confidence that good results from collaboration are possible</li> </ul>

Recommendations for the Partnership Initiative

**Concluding the pilot phase of PI**

Manage the moving on processes collaboratively and thereby model good partnering practice. Re-imagine what is needed next, building on the learning from this report. The following steps need to be considered:

- Take formal, consultative decision by the Steering Committee on concluding this phase of the PI;
- Communication: agree on the framing of this transformation from PI and when to communicate this by and to whom;
- Capture learning and celebrate successes.

**Test out whether building a strong Syrian civil society is a shared aim** across NGOs and if so, who is interested in another partnering experiment (not called PI but building on it) using considered and conscious collaborative techniques.

**Create mutual understanding and identify shared goals.** The experience of the PI shows the imperative to skillfully and effectively explore who the actors are and what they are looking for and how challenging this role can be. Although time and space is needed for discussion (which is what people do not seem to have available), nonetheless modelling skilled management of this collaborative process is needed and need not take a long time if consciously managed. Modelling how to create understanding and identify a clear shared aim built from diverse interests is important as this step cannot be overlooked without causing confusion down the line.

**Identify in an inclusive way** what individual organizations' needs are from each other, as well as the specific drivers.

**Track and evaluate** what difference there is when using partnership brokering and participatory methods:

- Map out the wider community with broad participation/input;
- Assess the will for better, transformative partnerships whilst being aware of the realities of time needed for this form of relationship so as to meet different drivers and needs in being effective and adding multiple value;
- Identify and decide on appropriate coordination mechanisms, leadership and roles;
- Build on input from these and other workshops.

	<p><b>Decide on governance and hosting arrangements</b> based on what emerges and not <i>a priori</i> decisions. Integrate the PI within other entities (the NGO forum, OCHA, UNDP were all suggested). However, careful consideration is needed whether one entity should house PI in its next iteration.</p> <p>Our suggestion is for a group of NGO actors to take this on, modelling shared leadership in action. Important to create group / shared / facilitative leadership rather than individual organizations or people. Look at mandates/interests/skills of the organizations involved and integrate activities as much as possible.</p>
<p>Enabling / encouraging donors, UN agencies and INGOs to adopt a more comprehensive approach to their role in partnering</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Promoting partnering as a delivery mechanism;</li> <li>○ Providing funding for partnership-generated projects;</li> <li>○ Investing in building partnering capacity and processes;</li> <li>○ Brokering new partnerships;</li> <li>○ Engaging as partners;</li> <li>○ Modeling high standards in partnering practice;</li> <li>○ Evaluating added value of partnering;</li> <li>○ Building constituencies for partnership action;</li> <li>○ Sharing learning about partnering challenges and good practice;</li> <li>○ Bringing a longer-term perspective.</li> </ul>



There are a number of practical suggestions (above) for next steps in building a far stronger basis for partnering in this complex and highly vulnerable context. Even without the kinds of challenges faced in Syria, partnering is never easy or a 'quick fix' solution. But it is also true that some of the most transformational partnerships have actually been born out of crisis – where they have been seen as the only possible way forward. This is because the very paradigm itself requires all those involved to learn how to acknowledge and work with differences (of opinion, values, culture and more) and, ultimately, to 'do different' because what was there before did not work and there is simply no alternative.

It is hoped that the workshop and strategic meeting will come to be seen as a turning point for humanitarian partnerships in northern Syria, even if this is just a first step in reflecting, exploring and experimenting to find what it will take for collaboration to be fully effective and make a significant difference.

*“All those involved (including us) are being challenged by the current circumstances in Syria to walk the talk of our principles and to enter into a genuine spirit of supportive collaboration (otherwise known as 'partnership') in which we pool our resources (financial and non-financial) and our diverse experiences with open-heartedness and humility.*

*As Syria's neighboring countries and Europe creak with the tensions of the refugee crisis, we have the opportunity to choose to invest in collaborative approaches that are penetrating and robust enough to help Syrian civil society build a bottom-up system that genuinely (and equitably) meets local needs as defined by local people.*

*Many of those we met and worked with in our brief time in Gaziantep were clear about the importance of building a true spirit of partnership through which all those involved could let go of old patterns of intervention and learn together how better to integrate respect and openness into their collaborative working practices and build a new operating culture that enables co-creating action for change.”<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Joanna Pyres & Helga van Kampen



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